EU HEADLINES

NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES OF EUROPEAN DEBATES

Omens & spectres

Events this week have taken a troubling turn on the Continent - four top stories outline a section of them.

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The bloc(ked)

Thousands of protesters rallied Tuesday in Georgia after its parliament adopted a law to brand overseas-funded NGOs as groups under "foreign influence", a measure Brussels has warned will undermine Tbilisi's European aspirations, *Times of Malta* reports. The EU has said the law is "incompatible" with Georgia's longstanding bid to join the bloc, while Washington has warned its adoption would signal Tbilisi's departure from the Western orbit. And it is not only the Westerners who are displeased about the bill; weeks of mass rallies culminated last week, when up to 100,000 people took to the streets in the largest anti-government rally in Georgia's recent history. Critics claim that the bill is a true testimony of the country's drift closer to Russia over recent years, with UK Defence Minister Grant Shapps labelling the foreign influence law an act of "Russian interference in Georgia." As Brussels was set to decide in December on the formal launch of accession talks with Georgia, the law adoption might be the block to join the bloc.

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Polls versus triggers

According to a Finnish researcher, the shooting of Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico this week can be considered an attempt to intimidate politicians and that Slovakia, like other European countries, is further polarising, writes Finnish newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*. Slovakia's prime minster was shot several times on Wednesday, and according to Slovak Interior Minister Matúš Šutaj Eštok, the shooter is suspected of having a political motive. The minister continued to say that the shooting is a sign of polarisation and that a time of strong confrontations is beginning: "the low threshold for the use of violence during the EU election campaign is visible in many countries, and not only in the East. It bodes very badly for the EU elections." Tragic coincidence? Researcher Heino Nyyssönen describes Wednesday's shooting as "a nightmare for all security services and politicians" and also draws attention to the timing of the shooting, with the European elections just weeks away. As Europeans soon heads to the polls, politicians might unfortunately fear the trigger.

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No time to lose

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is changing his travel plans to remain in Ukraine for the time being in the face of an increasingly difficult offensive by the Russians against the border city Vovchansk in the Kharkiv region, writes Portuguese newspaper *Expresso*. It began escalating on May 10 near Vovchansk, likely to force additional Ukrainian reinforcements to the front line while Russia prepares to push for the city Chasiv Yar in the Donetsk region, according to analyst Maximilian Hess. Though Russian troops managed to establish footholds inside the city, Ukrainian defenders have managed to repel 18 attacks and many troops as of Wednesday, though fighting continues. The full escalation on the city of Kharkiv began in February – a prize that Russian President Vladimir Putin has had his eyes on for years – with massive assaults of missiles, drones, and bombs. Hess believes that the troops involved are not enough to take the city, and that the real goal is to spread Ukrainian troops more thinly while strengthening its attack Chasiv Yar, as it has for nearly a month. As ever, it is clear that Ukraine needs more and better support from the United States and Europe, and it cannot come soon enough.

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Fair-weather friend

Balkan Insight features an opinion article expressing concern that despite its balanced relationship with Serbia and Kosovo, Hungary will ultimately favour Belgrade and cast Kosovo's interests to the side for its own interests. The author outlines that Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has a strong interest in EU expansion to the Western Balkans in three dimensions: trade and investment, protecting national minority rights, and energy security, which are most represented in Serbia. Amongst detailed explanations in each area, the author emphasises that Hungary has prioritised its relationship with Serbia, partly because Orbán and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić are both right-wing, populist, authoritarian, and Eurosceptic, sharing ideological views and approaches. Looking ahead as to how that might play out for Hungary and Kosovo, it appears that Hungary's approach is to generally take the Serbian side in diplomatic issues, and as the situation develops, Orbán may take that position even further. Pointing out the EU's inefficacy in setting Vučić (or Orbán) straight, the article writes that in the face of rising authoritarianism, other EU Member States will have to step up their support for Kosovo. Read on for the much more detailed analysis.

Read the full article

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